

Senate Education and Cultural Resources Committee

March 6, 2013

HB181

SENATE EDUCATION

EXHIBIT NO. 3

DATE 3/6/13

BILL NO. HB181

**Allow Local Trustees to Define Ratio of Certified Library Personnel to Students**

**Testimony of Dr. David F. Bedey**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is David Bedey. I am here to speak in support of House Bill 181, legislation that seeks to enforce the constitutional principle of “local control” as it pertains to determining the number of school librarians needed to meet a school district’s educational goals.

My experience in educational matters includes service as a professor of physics at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I taught, led an academic department, supervised the implementation of pedagogic reforms, conducted scientific research, and participated in senior-level, academy-wide governance in the areas of curriculum development, educational program assessment, and budgeting. Since late 2008, I have served on the Board of Trustees of the Hamilton School District and am currently its chairman.

However, I am not—I repeat not—appearing before your committee as a representative of the Hamilton School District. The testimony I give today is not a appeal for the Legislature to redress a problem regarding library staffing levels in the Hamilton School District. The District is in compliance with applicable accreditation standards.

Nor am I here to argue that library services are not important to achieving a district’s educational goals. Library services in general, and certified school librarians in particular, play an important role in educating our children. I suspect that today you will hear testimony from others to the effect that studies have shown a correlation between the provision of certified librarians and student achievement. This may be so, but such a finding does not tell the whole story. For research also shows that many other factors, e.g., teacher quality, class size, technology, and facilities, contribute to student achievement. The relative importance of each of the various components of a quality education depend on local conditions. There simply is no credible research-based formula for determining the right mix of resources to best serve a specific school

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district's needs. The framers of Montana's Constitution recognized this reality when it vested school district trustees with "supervision and control" of the schools within their district.

The practical challenge facing a local school board is to provide the best education to the district's students with the resources at its disposal. Taxpayers expect results with respect to student achievement, and they also expect their tax dollars to be spent wisely. I suspect that calls for alternatives to our present public education system (for example, charter schools) are driven by a perception held by many citizens that they are not getting an adequate return on their investment in the public schools and that local citizens have little say in how their schools operate. Maintaining public confidence in Montana's public schools demands that we demonstrate prudence in the expenditure of public funds and that local citizens, through their elected school board, exert meaningful ownership of their school district.

Resources are always scarce while "good ideas" are virtually unlimited. Fiscal responsibility is the art of allocating scarce resources to a district's highest priorities. Almost every action taken forecloses other opportunities. Prioritization isn't easy. It requires decision makers to make value judgments. I assert that those state accreditation standards that dictate how districts must resource programs have the effect of reducing budgetary flexibility, stifling innovation, and ultimately preventing districts from crafting education programs that best meet local needs. Passage of House Bill 181 is a step in the right direction toward rectifying this situation and thus enhancing the education of Montana's students.

The current state standard for determining the minimum number of librarians in a school district is a case in point. The specific staffing levels dictated in this standard cannot be justified on the basis of serious research. Instead, they most likely reflect a generalized professional judgment based on the assumption of some generic school environment. It is highly unlikely that such a one-size-fits-all standard will be the best match for an actual school district. The local school board, informed by the professional judgment of the district's administrators, is in a much better position to determine the optimal allocation of district resources, since it understands the actual needs of the district and can take into account competing requirements. For example, in some cases increasing librarian compensation to attract and retain fewer, but more effective, librarians



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might improve the library services provided to students in a given district. Or perhaps improving IT infrastructure, rather than adding librarians, might allow enhanced delivery of library services at lower cost, thus freeing funds for other district priorities. Or a district might determine that focusing on early childhood development by decreasing class size is a higher priority than staffing its libraries at the levels prescribed by the state, which might require eliminating a librarian position in order to free the funds needed to hire an additional first-grade teacher. These are tough decisions. Local school boards, advised by the professional educators serving in the district, ought to be empowered to make them without facing the threat of loss of accreditation or having to petition the Office of Public Instruction for waivers or variances.

There is a fundamental philosophical question at the foundation of this issue: Who is in the best position to understand the needs of the students in our local schools? Some will claim that local school boards are not competent to determine the library (or other) resources needed to achieve district goals. How much better qualified for this task is the Board of Public Education? Similarly, don't districts employ professional administrators to provide advice that ought to be at least as good as that coming from the Office of Public Instruction? If not, the Board of Public Education has failed in its duty to establish adequate credentialing requirements for school administrators.

Those who advocate the present top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to public education often reveal a thinly concealed mistrust of school trustees and by extension of the voters who elect them. It is my position, based upon experience "in the trenches," that the best decisions are made by those closest to the problem. The state's constitution has it right: Public schools are to be supervised and controlled by local boards of trustees while the Board of Public Education is only empowered to exercise general supervision over the public school system. We are capable of governing ourselves.

For public education to thrive in Montana, we must create an environment that encourages innovation and fiscal prudence. The present relationship between the state and local school districts is counterproductive. True "local control," which allows school boards to wisely expend resources to meet local needs, must be restored. In the context of "general supervision,"

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the role of the Board of Public Education and the Office of Public Instruction ought to be to support local boards of trustees by providing general standards for educational outcomes, a system of standardized tests to measure student achievement, credentialing requirements for education professionals, support of research on cognitive science, and guidelines (but not requirements) for resource allocation.

Readjusting the power relationship between local school boards and state agencies to bring it in line with Montana's Constitution would be a winner for students and for taxpayers. Both educational effectiveness and enhanced stewardship of taxpayer dollars would be promoted. This could not but help to reestablish broad-based public confidence in public education.

I urge this committee to support House Bill 181.

Thank you.